

A Comprehensive Essay

written by  
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## Prelude to a Murder

On the night of January 5, 1940 somewhere between the hours of 8:30 and 10:30 p.m., a cold-blooded murder took place in Aberdeen, Washington. The victim: 25 year-old, Finnish-born Laura Law; wife to Dick Law, business agent to the IWA (International Woodworkers of America) was brutally murdered in her home, while her two and a half year-old son "Dickie" lay in bed asleep through the whole ordeal.

Laura's body was found slumped over the davenport by the victim's mother, Sally Luoma, who also lived in the home, at approximately 10:32 p.m. The house was dark when Mrs. Luoma arrived, the only light came from the dimly lit Christmas tree that still stood in the corner of the room.

According to the coroner's report: Laura received five fatal blows to the head by a blunt instrument similar to an axe; seven puncture marks made on the left breast area received from another instrument similar to a stiletto, and several contusions (bruises) were discovered on the body as well.

Photographs of the murder scene revealed the blood-splattered walls, lamps, furniture and floor, and a remarkable amount of magazines, newspapers, letters, receipts, and other documents scattered about on the floor in the living room, as well as in the Law's and Mrs. Luoma's bedrooms where dresser drawers had been pulled out; the contents of which had been purposely thrown out. According to the police reports, the only room that wasn't tampered with appeared to have been the baby's room.

Although a burglary motive was one of the first and most obvious theories police considered (because similar ransackings had occurred

within the vicinity for quite awhile), it was quickly ruled out because nothing of value appeared to have been taken. In fact, Laura's black-knit purse was found unopened in the living room which contained several dollars.

Aside from the house being in such a disarray because of the various papers thrown about, the scene didn't indicate that a struggle took place between the victim and her assailant (s). For example; no furniture was turned over - nothing broken or out of place. In fact, according to Nick Yantzin, a retired police officer who worked on the case from the beginning, he recalls seeing a couple of baby toys lying on the armrests of the davenport where the body had been found. Also, there were no signs of forced entry through the doors or windows of the house.

Another consideration was that the davenport was located at such an angle that Laura had to have had clear vision to the front door and the dining room that led to the kitchen and the back door. In other words, if she was in fact, sitting on the sofa when the murderer (s) came into the house, she would have seen them. It just didn't make any sense that she would just "sit" there and take the attack "lying down." Because of these considerations, police investigators were led to believe that the murderer (s) might have been someone Laura knew and trusted.

Right at the onset of the investigation mistakes were made by the Aberdeen Police department - mistakes that continued to haunt them throughout the entire investigation. According to Nick Yantzin who was a Sargeant during the case, he was working on the desk that night when he got a call to go over to the house and "look for fingerprints." By the time he arrived, "the house was full of people. In addition to the victim's family, there were people who shouldn't have been there " he

said. "Friends of Dick roamed through the rooms, leaving their hand prints on everything." Unfortunately, the Assistant Chief of Police, Bob Schmidt made an error in not sealing the house off that night because if he had, valuable "crime scene" contents might not have been destroyed. Needless to say, no finger prints were ever lifted and no murder weapons were ever found.

The murder appeared to have the earmarks of something larger in scope than just a burglary, but what? Investigation by the Aberdeen Police department with the help of the FBI lasted from 1940 to 1953. During the 13 year span, hundreds of letters, reports, statements, observations, and other collected data, produced many angles and possible motives for the crime. The case involved some of the most tangled strands of an unsolved murder because of the perplexing circumstances that arose and surrounded the entire investigation.

Many people believed that her murder was somehow tied in with the wrecking of the Finnish Hall that was destroyed by a mob of vigilantes - who believed the hall was a communist front, others believed that Dick Law murdered her or had someone else do it for him because of his alleged affair with another woman, and still others, although much later, believed her murder was an assassination by the Communist Party after the Russian invasion of Finland.

Several years have elapsed since this unsolved crime took place. Several motives and possible suspects have been considered. But in order to get a better understanding of why this murder was so complex, one must regress to an earlier time, for the event came at a time of mass confusion and social unrest from the preceding decade of the 1930's. The country was suffering from the effects of prohibition, kidnappings, robberies, murder, law enforcement and city official corruptions, radical

labor movements, communism, and political views all played a role in the country's feelings of social discontent. Even on a local level such as in Grays Harbor County, these elements persisted with intense velocity. So, in order to understand this controversial case, one must go back to earlier times that unfolded and possibly helped shape this particular event.

#### The Tremulous Times of the 1930's

The 1930's represented one of the worst economically and socially depressing eras since the times of the Civil War. With the crash of Wall Street, October 29, 1929, came the shattered illusions of the American Dream. As one writer put it;

(Previously) "the nation had been basking in the illusion of eternal oppulance; the awakening was as if a realistic Joshua has snapped his fingers and shut off the sun."<sup>1</sup>

The Great Depression changed country men's views of life, liberty, and the pursuit of the American Dream. The economic and social consequences weakened man's view of his world, his government, and his own personal identity. Unemployment skyrocketed. Statistics indicate there were over 15 million unemployed by late in 1931, and more "idle" men were expected. Banks closed, people lost their homes, possessions, and their livelihoods. Bread lines formed and soup kitchens were set up throughout the country to help the masses. But the need severely outweighed the demand. The days were indeed gray and uncertain.

During this period of economic and social misery, before the Eighteenth Amendment was repealed, prohibition had provided for thousands of bootlegging operations which opened gateways for gangsters, mafia, and the corruption of "solid citizens" - including political and law enforcement officials. These tremulous times brought on new types of crimes; committed by new types of law breakers. According to President Hoover

during an address to the American public, and printed in the Aberdeen Daily World, January 9, 1931, he said that there were over "100,000 criminals in state and federal prisons and many more at large." Even the crimes committed were more severe than in prior years. Gangland crimes, murders, kidnappings, and robberies were all on the rise.

Not only was the U.S. faced with all its problems at home to contend with, but increased tensions and complex relationships were forming abroad as well. The years following this decade were not only dominated by the economic depression that almost ruined world trade and nearly brought financial ruin to several countries, but also fears of war highlighted these trying times.

The 1930's was termed as a "Period of Repudiation and Revision." Every country was fighting to stay alive in the wake of the economic disaster. In September of 1931, the bank of England was forced off the gold standard. The Japanese Army leaders apparently without proper approval, took advantage of the world's situation by occupying Mukden, Ch'ang-ch'un, and Kirin; three important Manchurian towns - resulting in an unofficial war between Japan and China. As the years progressed, more and more depressing events took place. Early in 1935, Italy began sending troops to East Africa in view of a hopeful Ethiopian conquest. By May of 1936, she had employed her air power and poison gases to successfully overthrow the government of Ethiopia. By March 7, 1936, Germany had reoccupied the Rhineland; a clear violation of the Versailles and Locarno treaties. By July 1936, the beginning of the Civil War in Spain had broke out. In September, 1938, Czechoslovakia had fallen entirely into the hands of the German Empire who now emerged as "the strongest power on the continent."<sup>2</sup> On September 1, 1939, Germany had invaded Poland. Any by November 30, 1939, Russia had invaded Finland. Of course these are only a mere fraction of the events that were occuring during

this era, but one thing is certain; tensions were evident world wide.

Meanwhile back in the U.S., battles were raging between the capitalists and the laborers. As newly-elected president Roosevelt forged ahead with his economy-boosting mechanisms; his New Deal Legislation plans, the union movement became increasingly more voiced in their anticipations and demands. In 1934, the National Labor board was abolished and replaced with a federal agency for investigations and mediations occurring as a result of labor disputes. By 1935, the Wagner-Connery Act was passed; a bill designed to allow employees the freedom to choose their own labor representatives. By this time, state-wide strikes were all too common. Strikes ran rampant because of the lack of economic recovery. Author Jeremy Brecht in his book entitled: Strike! best sums this problem up when he says that;

"Periods of depression generate widespread social misery and bitterness among workers; not only are millions unemployed, but wages are cut and managers try to cut labor costs through speed-up. The large number of unemployed at such times as 1877 and 1934 add a potential mass urban crowd of extreme bitterness ready to join street battles in support of strikers. Strikes during depressions are often extremely bitter, but they are difficult to win because employers have little margin of profit from which to grant wage increases or improvements in working conditions, and little to lose by closing down." (pg. 244)

Not only were the depression related strikes plaguing both sides, but some employers took advantage of the abundance of unemployed men by treating them like dispensible commodities; to be used and discarded when needed. Even Nick Yantz in recalls how he was treated when he worked on the docks unloading crates: "a man didn't dare complain to his employer about his wages or working conditions, " he said. "If he did he was fired on the spot because there were a hundred men waiting in line for his job."

## Radicalism in the Pacific Northwest

Bitter battles between management and labor have been going on since the times of the Great Upheaval. The Pacific Northwest received its first big dose of labor troubles during the first couple decades of the 1900's when the radical IWW Wobblies made their way to labor-intensive towns like Everett, Centralia, and Aberdeen. Wherever the labor groups went, tensions and trouble followed. Although the militant organizers fought for improved working conditions and increased wages, their biggest fight was in upholding their Fourteenth Amendment rights of free speech. No matter where they went, they were received negatively not only from city officials and the business sector, but also from some workers who were occasionally skeptical of the group's true intentions. After the stormy and sometimes violent episodes like the Everett and Centralia "massacres," most towns were left with apprehensible fears and anger towards the movement. The treatment of the Wobblies, including their sympathizers, and the stance taken by the business and law enforcers including the local judicial officials, had set a precedent towards the future treatment of radical labor groups. Nevertheless, the Wobblies undoubtedly helped pave the way for the future labor movement. And atleast to some degree, the new organizations that proceeded them like the CIO and the IWA for instance, could learn from and improve upon the Wobblies mistakes.

## Emergence of the CIO and IWA

Before the CIO and its affiliate, IWA came to Grays Harbor, most of the mills and logging operations were represented by the American Federation of Labor. The AF of L was considered to be a very strong and influential, yet, conservative organization that tried to remain neutral between capital and labor interests. Although some say that it was more of a friend to the capitalists than to the laborers. In

1935, during an AF of L convention held in Atlantic City, John L. Lewis, president of the powerful United Mine Workers, unveiled his plan of "organizing every industry in the country." By this time, several members of the AF of L were getting tired of the "do-nothing policies of the AF of L leaders." Lewis openly challenged the union with his newly reformed: Congress of Industrial Organizations. He said:

"The working class is waiting for us. We will build a powerful labor movement that will have tremendous results in the political, social and moral life of the United States." <sup>3</sup>

It seems that the verbal battle was on between the AF of L and the newly revised CIO. The top heads of the AF of L were extremely angered over Lewis's new vision. After all, Grays Harbor was their jurisdiction, not the CIO or its affiliate, IWA. The majority of strikes that took place during the second half of the decade were a result of employees fight over the right to choose their own labor union. In fact, according to U.S. labor statistics for 1934, 48% of the 1,856 strike incidents were over the right of representation. When the Wagner Act was passed, the CIO-IWA considered the bill to be exactly the advantage they needed to sign up new members. In Grays Harbor, a timber-rich and labor intensive area, with over 21,000 people, the CIO gained a respectable amount of new members. The campaign was on. If you were a worker who believed and supported the "progressive CIO," you voted for its affiliate IWA as your representative. If you were more conservative-minded, you chose the prevailing AF of L to sponsor you. An interesting thought to keep in mind is that working conditions in the logging camps didn't improve as quickly as the conditions did in the mills. The loggers were generally considered to be more militant voiced than the millworkers. Thus, the loggers appeared to be more attracted to the progressivism of the new union.

## Fears of Communism

Even during the times of the Wobblies, fears and threats of communism were evident. That didn't change over the next few decades. In a paper entitled: A Call For Industrial Defense and addressed by John H. McIntosh, manager of the Federated Industries of Washington, and given before the Sheriff's Association during a convention held in Port Angeles, Washington on July 18, 1923, Mr. McIntosh raised several questions relating to the dangers that industries were facing due to the radical labor union leaders and the communist infiltrators tactics. He writes:

..."The organized enemies of our government and our institutions know full well they can best weaken the country by undermining its industries..." (pgs. 3-4)

He goes on to say that:

"...the union leader seeks to dictate wages, shorten hours, name new shop rules, restrict production, and then if the employer does not suit him, calls a strike." (pg.6)

He then refers to the dreaded "red" menace:

"...the radical is the master leach of all the blood suckers. He literally fattens on discontent and unrest, many of which he himself initiates." (pg.6)

As McIntosh continues his "cry for Industrial Defense," he includes a powerful excerpt from an article published in the New York Commercial written by Fred Marvin entitled: Underground with the Reds. He quoted Marvin as follows:

"There is in this country, a well-organized, managed and sufficiently financed movement to overthrow this government and confiscate all wealth, by a bloody revolution should that become necessary, in order that those directing such a revolution may erect upon the ruins a purely socialistic form of government and a purely communistic form of business, forms which would take from the individual all hope, aspiration, initiative and inspiration, would abolish the property rights and so the home surrounding; yes, would go even further than that-would abandon the family relations...." (pg. 15)

The excerpt goes on to discuss the way in which communist organizers

infiltrate, especially foreign-born workers' social and fraternal organizations as a means of organizing the unorganized. Keep this last point in mind because it will have bearing on a future event that will be discussed shortly.

It is easy to understand how and why this line of thinking gained a great deal of support by the end of the 1920's and continued to gain momentum into the proceeding decades. As a result of labor's threat to industry and the radical "red" components within the unions, concerned citizens leagues were formed in hopes of circumventing some of the fears that had arisen.

The Better Business Builders in Aberdeen, Washington was the first group to form. It was an organization comprised of local business men approximately 1100 members who got together in the latter part of 1938. The Builders were similar to the Commercial Club in Everett that formed as a result of the problems they were faced with when the Wobblies invaded their town a couple decades earlier. From the business men's perspective, their chief objective was to promote honest and peaceful negotiations between management and labor without the use of strike tactics. However, the groups' strongest concern seemed to be the fact that certain labor groups, namely the IWA, contained union members who were communist organizers. In an article printed in the newspaper, The Aberdeen Daily World, dated March 20, 1939, Dan McGillicuddy, a member of the Builders, was quoted as saying that:

"Grays Harbor is known from one end of America to the other as a proving ground for radicalism...Grays Harbor is known as the Little Soviet of the U.S. ...We have that reputation and we must get rid of it."

Another article dated May 25, 1939 and also in the Aberdeen paper, goes on to mention that:

"It is the firm belief of the Business Builders that a very active

minority, chiefly communist has gained control of certain industrial unions in this locality, and has succeeded to some extent a program of disruption, chaos, and unrest...The lumbering and logging operations were actively driven out of existence by destructive tactics of certain labor leaders whom we believe to be communist or under the influence of communism."

Besides this group's influence on the harbor, another group emerged about the same time which consisted mainly of working class men. They called themselves the Order of the Better Americans. The organization was chaired by I.E. Mosier, and its formation was based on a campaign against all "Isms": Fascism, Nazism, and Communism of which the latter was their strongest aim. In a circular that was found in the Law home during the investigation; gives a clear indication of the group's mode of thinking. Some parts are worth quoting:

"Pritchett Ordered Out of Country!

Bridges Faces Deportation Next Month!

Local Business Agent Proven Ex-Convict

Dick Law Leads Goon Squads!

To those who work in the mills and camps of Grays Harbor and have some self respect, it is needless to say that our face turns red we see such headlines as those included in the public press regarding our alleged leaders....Lewis, Brophy, Pritchett, Orton - and locally - Tucker, Ex-Convict Law, and Morris don't give a damn if you work or not so long as you can pick up enough nickels to pay your dues and assessments and their salaries and expenses. These apes-Heinie Huff's apes-used to yell like hell that all the carpenters and joiners wanted was the per capita tax...These guys who have scuttled labor's ship on Grays Harbor wanted more than capital tax. They took the whole damn treasury, levied assessments and then on top of that fixed it so you can't even work to pay their unreasonable and unfair demands. In fact, they are using the assessment to put up a fight that will indefinitely keep you off the job. The reason they don't want you to go back to the AF of L, which would bring you work, is they know their activities and affiliations would not stand the search light that would be thrown on them if they hoped to keep a job in a good, stable and dependable union organization....Fellows it's a damned insult to our common sense to let these fellows drive us any further. WAKE UP! LET'S GET'EM AND GO TO WORK!..."

The circular was issued by "every workmen representing every wood-working plant in Grays Harbor." And it was signed "Committee for Industrial Stabilization."

Besides the Order of Better Americans and Better Business Builders, another active groups was the Klu Klux Klan. Although there were only a handful of negroes living in the area, the KKK directed their campaign of hate towards the elimination of communists in the area. In another article printed in the Aberdeen Daily World, and dated June of 1937, Bill Anderson, the district financial secretary of the IWA, asserted that the Klan had "sent eight or ten warning notes to some of the local members of the IWA local #2" (Aberdeen). Apparently, the notes contained threats to the members and their families if they didn't leave the area. The notes appeared to be sent to those who were rumoured to be connected to the Communist Party or to those who appeared to be "radical."

While all the animosity between labor, management, and the citizen groups increased by mid 1939, the IWA union locals 2-3 were having their own problems within their organization. In an article printed in the industrial paper, The Timber Worker, June 3, 1939, written by Dick Law and Ted Dokter, the men asserted that they had:

"documentary evidence definitely linking the Grays Harbor Better Business Builders, with a few officers and members of IWA Local 3-2, in a long planned attempt to destroy the IWA."

The evidence they said,

"contains the statements and admissions of Joe Clark, John Deskins, and Red Fadling and implicating H.T. Tucker, reveals the connivance of a small group of union members who have been working hand-in-glove to put across the Better Business Builders' attack on the IWA and bring about the destruction of Local No. 2."

The article went on to mention that both Law and Dokter had proof that some of their members had "sold out" the union by reporting to the Better Business Builders certain information that would affect the union. According to one source I interviewed who prefers to remain anonymous as to not take sides in this issue, he claims that sometime before 1939, Bill Anderson the district financial secretary of IWA

Local #2 had "lost" several hundred dollars of union money that he was responsible for. Mr. Anderson managed to obtain a loan from one of the main Aberdeen banks through the bank's president. But the stipulation made by the bank president was that he would furnish Anderson with the money in exchange for "certain information" regarding the IWA union - including its members and leaders. Union information like strategies, proposals, negotiations, and strikes.

How Did Dick Law Fit Into All This?

By now it's not difficult to see how Dick Law fit into the scheme of things during this time frame. After all, his name was brought up in various circulars like the one quoted a couple pages back as well as other leaflets. Since Dick was elected to serve as business agent for Local #2 in the summer of 1938 after serving for two years as one of the union's financial trustees, many people believed he was connected to the Communist Party. During a interview with Attorney Stanley J. Krause, who served as the Prosecuting Attorney during the Coroner's Inquest, he had this to say about Dick Law:

"Dick was in the middle of disputes involving labor. Of course over the years, there were really two groups as far as the unions were concerned to represent the working people. And he (Dick) was on one side and of course, he had the respect of the people of his group and the disrespect of the other group...and feelings got quite deep as far as that's concerned due to the fact that some of the groups accused him of being a communist, and of course, you couldn't say anything that was much more disrespectful of a person."

There is little background information about Dick Law. Dick was born in Medford, Oregon and he worked in various timber-related jobs until he landed his paid position as business agent. It seems that Dick also had a prison record. In 1932, he was arrested and charged with a burglary of a commercial establishment. He was convicted in Tillamook County, Oregon and sent to Oregon State Penitentiary where he served a two year sentence. Also before this incident, in 1930, Dick pleaded

not guilty to a charge of Assault with a dangerous weapon. The assault was on a black woman prostitute who lived in Klamath Falls, Oregon. The assault charge, however, was dismissed due to lack of evidence and the lack of credibility on behalf of the woman plaintiff.

In 1935, he worked for the Clemons Logging Company as a highclimber where he also met his future wife Laura. In 1936, they were married. Dick was always considered a good organizer and the type of man that stood up for his convictions. In his last radio speech two months before the murder, he discussed the problems labor was facing due to a lack of representation in governmental agencies like the Industrial War Board, and the discrimination and blacklist techniques employed by the capitalists towards workers (especially loggers), who were considered more "militant." As Dick's voice and influence among workers accentuated, the concerned citizens groups became more heated and resentful towards him.

#### Vigilantism in Aberdeen

While the new IWA union continued to gain additional strength through an increase in memberships, the concerned citizens became more outraged and fearful of the outcome in Grays Harbor. On December 2, 1939, the anger became uncontrollable when the Finnish Workers Hall in Aberdeen was invaded by a vigilante mob that destroyed everything inside the building.

The hall on First street was used by Finnish workers - including the Ladies Auxillary of which Laura Law belonged to. The mob destroyed: recently purchased dishes and silverware to serve a hundred people, all of which was smashed to pieces on the floor. The expensive drapes that hung in the library and the reading rooms were pulled down from the windows and slashed to strands; the books were torn up and some were tossed out the windows. The piano was "pounded to an indistinguishable mass." Even the authentic Finnish costumes used for plays were slashed

and ripped into threads. Not a single chair, lamp, or anything was left undamaged. All this destruction was done because the hall was rumoured to be a communist organization. In fact, today most people who live in Aberdeen and remember the incident, refer to the hall as the Red Finn Hall.

This act of sabotage angered many people in the community as well as members of other organizations like Ladies Auxilliaries in other towns. Remember, as previously mentioned the article by Fred Marvin when he explained how the communist operate and organize behind fraternity and social clubs. In Arthur Shield's book entitled: On the Battle Lines, Shields recalls how "Big Bill Gebert," a "star organizer" for the Steel Workers had been successful in "recruiting thousands of members by using the foreign-born workers' fraternal societies as his organizing base." (p.221) Could this have been what happened with the "Red Finn Hall?" Was it a communist front? The vigilantes thought so. Another thought to keep in mind is that this mob raid wasn't a rare or unique occurrence. Mob incited raids have been common since the Great Upheaval times. Even a few weeks prior to this event, a Workers hall in San Francisco was invaded and destroyed in the same manner and for the same reason: communism.

A lot of the community's anger and frustration was directed towards the Aberdeen Police department because rumours had it that not only did the department know in advance about the wrecking, but photographs had been taken during the actual destruction by the vigilantes. A few days after the episode, the police department was rumoured to have insisted that the group relinquish the pictures to the department for "safe-keeping. What angered the citizens the most was the fact that many of the men involved in the wrecking were clearly identified in the photos, yet, no - one was ever arrested or charged with the crime.

With or without the photographs, many people held their own opinions as to who the vigilantes were. Some felt that the Better Business Builders might have done the job, while others were convinced that it was the work of the Klu Klux Klan or the Order of Better Americans who were responsible. Recently, however, I interviewed another source who also prefers to remain anonymous, who claims that it was the work of the Better Americans among others. Rumours also had it that Laura and Dick Law were extremely upset over the incident. A letter sent to an Aberdeen minister, Reverend Elgin El. Lang on March 6, 1940 from Hoquiam Lawyer, F.L. Morgan describes the connection of the Finn hall and Laura Law:

"Mrs. Law, the deceased, was very much angered and incensed at the destruction of the Finnish Workers hall. She herself was gathering evidence and information concerning it and her husband was likewise very active in getting this information."

Rumours were also surfacing right after the murder that Dick Law had information regarding the people who destroyed the hall, and that he had told his wife about it prior to her murder. Rumours also suggested that Dick Law had filed the information away in his green file cabinet-located in the couple's bedroom on the night of the murder, right before he left that night for his union meetings.

Could this possibly be what happened? Did Dick and Laura have damaging evidence indicating who was involved with the wrecking of the hall? Was the evidence really placed in the green file cabinet on the night of the murder? Could someone (s) have murdered her for the mere reason of getting the dangerous evidence back? No one knows for sure because these were only speculations and rumours floating around at the time.

In a letter addressed to Governor Martin dated January 12, 1939, from a former resident of Grays Harbor, Mr. Wesley Whilt, Mr. Whilt not only tried to urge the governor to support the labor movement in Grays Harbor or "repercussions would gather against him politically,"

but he also referred to the "vigilante minds" and the "lack of lawlessness in the area. He said:

"I believe it would be a damn good political move for you to swing enough to the left to appoint a special prosecution assistant to clear up the "lack of law and order" existing in Grays Harbor County...I know every man in Grays Harbor with enough business sense to hire someone else to work for him. I also know the viciousness of the vigilante mind in Hoquiam, especially pertaining to the origin of gangs and clicks to further individual ends. Grays Harbor is filled with the most selfish, property conscious, heritary employing class of people in the entire state...."

Was Grays Harbor filled with a "lack of lawlessness?" Many citizens felt strongly so. Included in the Aberdeen City Council minutes on January 3, 1940, the Finnish Socialist Society presented a claim against the city in the sum of \$20,295.40 to cover the damage done to the Finnish Hall that they claimed was "due to a negligence of Police officers in not suppressing the riot." Included in the letter previously mentioned between Reverend Lang and written by Attorney Morgan, Morgan hotly denounces the Ministerial Association for the expressing their "total satisfaction with the law enforcement in Aberdeen" before and after the murder. He went on to say that:

"Not only did the police officers of the City of Aberdeen know about the raid (Finn Hall) when it was going on but they had advance notice of it and it went on for four hours without any effort on their part to prevent the destruction of this property. ...I have been in this county for many years. From the time of Sheriff Gibson through the incumbency of Sheriff Bartell, law enforcement in Grays Harbor County has been a farce. Three other murders in Grays Harbor have went unpunished. When we were endeavoring to bring Gibson to time (and finally landed him in the Federal penitentiary) we met with almost uniform opposition of the ministers of Grays Harbor County....In all our efforts to bring criminals to justice...I can count on the fingers of one hand the ministers who have been of any help....If I am the last man in Grays Harbor to stand up and protest against official corruption and wickedness, I will stand and I shall protest."

During my conversations with a couple of retired police officers who were employed during this time frame, credence was given in regards to Morgan's assertions that there were corruptive elements within the department. "Things were wide open in those days," was the general comment that these men made. Prostitution, bootlegging, and gambling were generally accepted by the business sector as well as the law enforcement agency. Although raids were made on the establishments about every three months, or when the Feds made a visit, the department was paid off in exchange for notifying the illegal businesses when a raid would take place. And as far as the police department's suppression of the Finnish Hall perpetrators, <sup>was concerned, only</sup> one can imagine that many of the vigilantes involved were also acquaintances and/or friends with some of the police officers.

#### Night of the Murder

On the night of the murder after supper, Dick Law drove his in-laws downtown to the Weir Theatre on his way to attend a couple union meetings. Laura remained at home to care for their son and to catch up on her crocheting. When Dick received a phone call that night from Nestor Luoma, his father-in-law, telling Dick "quick come home, something terrible has happened," Dick was so nervous that he didn't bother walking a couple blocks to get his car, instead he flagged Louie Mandich, a taxi cab driver to take him home. When Mr. Mandich was questioned by the police a couple days later as to what he and Dick talked about during the short ride home that night, Louie said that the only conversation that transpired between he and Dick was that Dick had said: "maybe the vigilantes have invaded my home."

Shortly after the police arrived on the scene, and began questioning family, neighbors, and relatives, Dick had made reference indicating that he thought the Better Business Builders might have had some-

thing to do with the murder. He also named one man in particular: John Vekich as someone who might have done this because a few months earlier, while Laura was visiting a sick friend in the hospital, she had given "Dickie" her house keys to play with while she was in the hospital room. But when she came out, the child no longer had the keys and she wondered if John had taken them from the boy. The keys apparently were never found. Dick however, was convinced that he had taken them because he related this incident to the police that night of the murder and also in his testimony the next day.

John Vekich, according to his own words considered himself to be a "loner." At the time of the murder he had been unemployed for over a year and a half. He stayed at the Armory on East Third street - a street away from the murdered victim. Although John didn't appear to have many friends, he spent a great deal of time in the presence of Russell V. Mack, editor and publisher of the Washingtonian newspaper of Hoquiam and also a member of the Better Business Builders, and Joe Schneider, the manager of the Aberdeen Hospital, also a "low-key" member of the Builders. It seems that according to Vekich's own statement of January 9, 1940, that he was working for Joe Schneider "getting the goods on the communists." Prosecuting Attorney, Stanley Krause questioned Vekich as to why he believed Dick Law had named him as a key suspect in the case. Some of the testimony is worth quoting:

Mr. Krause:

Q Have you been active against, to some extent, against Mr. Law's principles?

A Against the communist part, yes

Q You said something about his being a communist.

A Yes

Q You have made that assertion?

A Yes, I have.

Q Of course you know that Mr. Law asked that you be investigated?

A I understood that in a round about way.

Q Very likely there is some reason why he asked it?

A Yes, I believe I know...

Q You might as well go back and explain the whole thing.

A It all goes back to when we were in the AFL union and I was working at the Donovan mill. I met him thru the union activities. I was in a sort of conservative bunch and Dick always seemed to oppose us. Finally I got among Dick and some of the fellows and it went on and finally they asked me to join the progressives - that's what they called themselves. Thru them I met Anderson and Heine Huff, the communist organizers. I was approached to join the party and I didn't; I've been opposed to their policy ever since."

Besides John Vekich, Dick Law also named nine others who he thought might have had something to do with the murder and/or the wrecking of the Finn hall, of which he believed both were connected to one another. The other men Dick named were: Joe Schneider, Ward Penning, Joe LaLonde, John Deskins, Russell V. Mack, William Baker, I.E. Mosier, Vilas Lant, and Joe Clark. All ten men, including John Vekich, were considered members of either the Order of Better Americans and/or the Better Business Builders.

Although these assertions made by Law were hotly denied by the conservative side and widely considered by the left, the police refused to entertain these possibilities. In fact, it appeared that the tables were turning against Dick Law. Now he was becoming the accused.

A couple days after the murder, theories were floating around that Dick Law might have committed the murder or he had hired an out-of-towner to do the job. Why? Well, rumours had it that Dick was having an affair with a woman by the name of Helen Sobolewski, who worked as a secretary/bookkeeper for the IWA office in Seattle. Also, Dick's arrest record was brought out in the open again. And from the police

department's view, there seemed to be some discrepancy in testimonies as to whether the house was locked or unlocked the night of the murder. According to Dick's repeated statements, he claimed that Laura always locked the doors when he was gone. But according to Mrs. Luoma's statements, no one ever locked the doors except when they put the milk bottles out at night before going to bed. The conflict in testimonies only deepened the suspicions against Dick.

### Coroner's Inquest

During the inquest that began on January 12, 1940, and ran through to the 20th, only Dick Law was considered a number one "suspect." He was one of the only witnesses that was allowed to be cross-examined by Prosecuting Stanley Krause, Special Prosecuting Assistant, Paul Manley, and the coroner, John Stevenson. The ten men named by Law were only allowed to be questioned by the prosecutors and the coroner. Nothing too significant came out of the inquest except that according to the five medical examiners that took the stand, the wounds on the victim's breast area had been inflicted after she was already dead because there were no traces of blood found in the wounds. And according to the police who took the stand, they believed that whomever murdered her had ransacked the home after she was dead and for no apparent reason other than to throw the authorities off the track.

When Helen Sobolewski took the stand, the prosecutors tried unsuccessfully, however, to get her to admit she and Dick were having an affair. They did, however, manage to call upon a couple of her former friends (Helen had been born and raised in Aberdeen) who took the stand and openly admitted the couple's relationship. Things didn't look good for Dick. Although there was no substantial evidence linking him to the murder of his wife, and his alibi seemed air-tight, the dangerous combinations of his alleged affair, his prison record, and the business involving the locked or unlocked house left apprehension

in many peoples' minds. Yet, in others, especially Dick Law supporters, they saw the inquest as a way to frame Dick for the murder.

As a result of the crime and police's incapacity to "bring the murderer to justice," the Grays Harbor Civil Liberties Committee was formed. The committee set up shop in the now delapidated, historical Finch Building and was chaired by Attorney Morgan and assisted with the help of the Ladies Auxilliary and a few members of the local IWA union. The group wrote letters to Governor Martin, Aberdeen's mayor Horrocks, and other officials condemning the way the local authorities were handling the case and condemning the police for their attempted "Frame-up" of Dick Law. In one two-page leaflet the committee put out during the inquest, the group asserted that:

"Unless the public most vigorously protests the shameful conduct of the prosecution and police in their "investigation" of this case, Grays Harbor County may be the scene of another frame-up similar to the Mooney-Billings and Sacco and Vanzetti cases."

For the record, Tom Mooney and Warren Billings were two top union organizers who were occused and sentenced to life in prison for the bombing that killed ten people during a pro-war parade in San Francisco on July 16, 1916. Nicola Sacco, a shoe factory worker and Bartolemeo Vanzetti, a clam digger and fish peddler, were accused of killing a "company guard and paymaster and stealing more than \$15,000 of company funds in front of a shoe facotry in South Braintree, Massachusetts, on April 15, 1920." <sup>4</sup> Both the Mooney-Billings and the Sacco and Vanzetti cases were a result of "red baiting" tactics that many times convicted the wrong persons in order to "control" or temporarily silence the labor movements.

Because of the political repercussions, the Chief of Police, George Dean, Mayor Horrocks, and Governor Martin, were careful in their handling of Dick Law. After all, he did have alot of people

on his side; people who were voters. The officials had to be cautious in their accusing him. But on the other hand, the men named by Law also carried a lot of political weight. A few months later, George Dean became very ill. The pressure from the case had finally caught up with him, and he was getting on in years. He checked into the Aberdeen Hospital and died shortly thereafter. After his death the investigation slowed down.

### Communist Connection

In 1950, ten years after the murder during the McCarthy era, Paul Crouch, a former member of the Communist Party asserted that Laura's murder was an assassination made by certain members of the Communist Party. His words are worth noting:

"I do not recall whether I first heard of the Laura Law murder from newspapers or from a feature article on it in FRIDAY magazine, an ultra-leftish magazine staffed with Communists, it was cleverly written Communist propaganda giving the inference that Laura Law was murdered by "lumber interests" in Washington as an act of revenge against her husband, Dick Law, for his union activities.

But in conversations with party leaders from Washington and representatives of the Central Committee I got a very different picture...From them and from the general discussions in top party circles nationally, I learned that at the time of her death, Laura Law had left the party. Also, there were references to her as "belonging to a 'White Guard' Finnish family; and that she had relatives in Finland who were among "Mannerheim's Butchers."

He went on to mention that consideration should be kept in mind that the murder took place about a month after the Soviet invasion of Finland. Could this possibly be what had happened all this time but never considered? I came across a confidential letter from Portland's Chief of Detectives, Captain John Keegan, dated January 19, 1940, addressed to Chief George Dean. The confidential letter said that the bureau had come across "certain information" indicating that:

"Mrs. Law was at one time quite high up in the Communist Party,

but that after the Russian invasion of Finland she became very bitter against the Communist and for that reason became a menace to the Party because of the information she had concerning them...."

By the time Crouch had made his assertions, the case was cold.

Dick Law had married Helen Sobolewski years prior and by this time, both had dropped out of sight. On July 1, 1953, Dick Law checked into the Governor's Hotel in Olympia where he took an overdose of barbituates and committed suicide. After his death, several anonymous letters flooded the department with statements claiming Dick Law was the murderer but "they were afraid to say anything while he was alive."

To this day, the law enforcement officials believe that Dick was the murderer. Probably the main fact that sticks in their craw the most is the conflicting statements regarding whether the house was locked or unlocked that night. The conflict was never forgotten. Yet, on the other hand, because of Laura's alleged connection to the Finn Hall and the vigilante atmosphere in the community, union people are still convinced that her murder was committed by someone (s) else other than Dick Law. Nevertheless, no one was ever charged with the crime. Attorney Morgan's prophecy came true when he said that:

"None will be and I venture to prophecy now that no one will ever be arrested for the murder of Mrs. Law...."

It's been forty-seven years since the murder took place. Most of the people who were around during this time have either passed away or moved on. Others who remember, prefer no to.

Looking back to the tremulous times of the 1930's reveals the tensions the country faced both home and abroad. Depression, prohibition, law enforcement corruptibility, powerful political machines, the threat of communism, murder, mayhem, labor unrest, and maneviolent violence pervaded the country and shook our confidence. All these general feelings were somehow correlatively connected to the single

episode that released itself on the single being of Laura Law. Laura's memory has gone down in the annals of local history as a martyr. A martyr for labor, Finnish people, and the woman's movement. Laura Law, a martyr for the cause, is only one human being who took the wrath for the pains of growth of a changing society.

## Notes

- 1 Virginia Thatcher and Alexander McQueen, "The Story of America," The New Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language, 1984 ed., p. 410.
- 2 William Langer, An Encyclopedia of World History, 1948 ed., p. 1012.
- 3 Art Shields, On the Battle Lines: 1919-1939 (New York: International Publishers, 1986), pp. 198-199.
- 4 *ibid*, pp.28-29.

## Other Sources

Major sources for this essay were found in the Washington State Archives, Olympia, Washington: Laura Law Case files, Governor Martin files, and the Grays Harbor Police Records, 1932-1937. Also, I relied heavily on newspaper articles from especially the Aberdeen Daily World paper. In addition to, I consulted with several people in Grays Harbor, especially retired police officers, retired millworkers and loggers.